DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 402 792 FL 024 357

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TITLE Ideology and Linguistic Theory: Noam Chomsky and the Deep Structure Debates.
REPORT NO ISBN-0-415-15313-1
PUB DATE 95
NOTE 196p.
AVAILABLE FROM Routledge, 29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001-2299 (hardback: ISBN-0-415-11735-6, $25, Canadian $29.95; paperback: ISBN-0-415-15313-1, $18.95, Canadian $26.95).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Books (010)

EDRS PRICE Document Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Deep Structure; Discourse Analysis; Educational History; *Grammar; Language Patterns; Language Processing; Language Research; *Linguistic Theory; *Persuasive Discourse; Rhetoric; *Semantics
IDENTIFIERS *Chomsky (Noam); *Generative Semantics

ABSTRACT

A revisionist account of the development of ideas about semantics in modern theories of language is presented, focusing on the rift between Noam Chomsky and Generative Semanticists about the concept of deep structure, or the role of meaning in grammar. The discussion re-appraises the paradigm that has dominated American linguistics since the 1960s. The first chapter introduces the text. The second reviews the chief arguments of Interpretive Semanticists against the generative approach, and the developments of Chomsky's and Generativist programs are examined in the intellectual contexts in which they arose. Gaps in the paradigm are identified. Chapter 3 focuses on the rhetorical techniques used in the dispute, in particular the logical content of some arguments and the force of the language in which they were framed. Chapter 4 considers why, if the Generative Semanticists did not accept Chomsky's arguments, the movement fell apart so rapidly in the 1970s. It is suggested that Generative Semantics failed for reasons that had little to do with the quality of its results. The final chapter considers the meaning of the dispute about deep structure for contemporary linguistic work. (MSE)

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